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## Religious Book and Bible Publishing

EDWARD L. SHEPPARD

WHILE THE RELIGIOUS BOOK has had immeasurable influence on American life it has not attracted the historian of thought. As a genus, its definition is difficult. The popular moral essay, the pious tale, as well as the sermon and theological treatise, must claim inclusion. For this purpose the field will be limited to literature inspired by organized religious life and written to foster it. Religious publications originated in America to serve the purposes of the churches and are still in large measure "denominational." Church presses from the Methodist Book Concern (1789) to the Seabury Press (1951) established the basic pattern. While in the past decade the religious book has assumed prominence in the lists of general publishers, the denominational houses continue as the foundation of religious publishing.

The beginnings of the religious book are found in New England. The theocratic character of society produced a prolific religious literature. New England sermons provided a commentary on problems which covered a much wider area than the purely doctrinal, reached a larger audience, and were generally printed at the request of the parish church rather than commercially published.<sup>1</sup>

The organization of denominations following the Revolution provided an impetus to publishing. Problems of education and the promotion of piety in a thinly settled country required wide distribution of literature for clergy and laity. Francis Asbury, pioneer bishop of American Methodism, emphasized constantly the role of the circuit rider in disseminating literature. The Methodist Book Concern actually used the preacher as retail bookseller. The literature of the American Tract Society, founded in 1825, greatly extended the work of the denominations.

While general publishers always included a goodly number of religious titles in their lists, the denominational presses grew steadily

Mr. Sheppard is Librarian, Garrett Biblical Institute.

as church life became stabilized. Early in the twentieth century, however, interest on the part of the general publisher declined while denominational presses assumed a less sectarian program. In the period from 1910 to 1930, most denominational publishers dropped their sectarian label. The Methodist Book Concern became the Abingdon Press, the imprint of the American Unitarian Association became the Beacon Press, the Presbyterian Board of Publication became the Westminster Press, and the United Lutherans organized the Muhlenberg Press. With the change of name, a broader policy came into being, and direct denominational control was reduced so that materials were directed to the general Protestant public as well as to a specific denomination.

Catholic publishing had its beginnings in 1785 with Matthew Carey. His work was continued by Carey & Lea, and later, Lea & Febiger. Both general and Catholic publisher, his work was originally subsidized by de Lafayette. The rapid growth of Catholic publishing begins in the middle of the century when the Catholic population increases through mass immigration. The firm of P. J. Kenedy & Sons, designated "publisher to the Holy See" in 1895, was founded in 1866. The American branch of Benziger Brothers, a Swiss firm, was founded in 1853.

The first Jewish firms date also from this period. The Bloch Publishing Company was established in 1854 in Cincinnati and moved to New York in 1901. The Jewish Publication Society of America was founded in 1888. Jewish publications also appeared under the imprint of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

The interest of trade publishers in religion revived in the 1930's under the influence of new theological trends, but the full impact of this renaissance was not felt until after the war. In 1946, a total of 530 religious titles were produced out of 7,735 new books. In 1957, this number had increased to 1,003 out of 13,142 titles. While the percentage increase is not large, it is significant that general publishers are today producing a much larger proportion of the total religious output than a decade ago.

While a few general publishers, notably Harpers, Scribner's and Macmillan, have had distinguished records in the field of religious publishing dating back to the 1860's, the entry of most general houses active today into the religious area occurred after 1930. Increased emphasis on religion in higher education has produced a large text-

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book demand.<sup>2</sup> The greatest impetus for this development, however, comes from the movement "back to religion." The success of Bishop Sheen and Norman Vincent Peale has demonstrated that the religious book can be a profitable undertaking. While the trade publisher directs his religious titles usually to the general public, some houses have entered the Catholic field as well (Doubleday & Company, Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy). Among university presses, Harvard, Yale, and Chicago lead in Protestant publishing. The growth of the book club idea among the clergy has made the production of the religious book financially more rewarding. The popularity of the lenten reading list has had considerable influence on sales.

Protestant publishers may be either non-denominational or, in the case of the larger church bodies, denominational. W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company is the largest non-denominational press, and produces both original works of a strongly conservative character and reprints of significant standard sets.

The larger denominationally-related publishers are Abingdon Press (Methodist), Westminster Press (Presbyterian), Muhlenberg Press (United Lutheran), Judson Press (Baptist), Beacon Press (Unitarian) and Seabury Press, Inc. (Episcopalian) and produce works of general interest to all Protestants. Their lists include authors of various backgrounds and points of view. Publishers such as Concordia Publishing House (Missouri Synod Lutheran) and Morehouse-Gorham Co. (unofficial Episcopalian) direct books to their own churches.

Theological trends since 1940 have had a profound impact, particularly the rediscovery of Reformation theology and its manifestation in "neo-Orthodoxy," the Ecumenical movement, and the revival of "Biblical theology." The influence of Continental thought on American theology resulted in much translation. Works of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Rudolf Bultmann point out the transformation from the provincial to the cosmopolitan outlook. Relations between American and British publishers such as the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, Student Christian Movement, and English university presses developed rapidly and brought many English theologians under American imprints. Among American university presses, Harvard and Chicago benefited considerably from the revival of their theological faculties.

Since denominational publishers act as church-supply houses, ministers maintain a close contact with them. Sermons, Biblical commentaries, religious education materials, and denominational histories

are supplied by the denominational house, which may also act as agents for other firms.

Beacon (Unitarian) is of widest general interest, since this denomination is committed to a liberal social program. A minimal number of titles of denominational interest are produced by a division of the press, and philosophy and social science account for most of its production. Paul Blanchard's *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (1948) inaugurated a series on church-state relations.

Most closely related to its church program is Seabury, whose doctrinal and devotional books are distinctly Episcopalian. A growing number of titles such as R. C. Miller's *Be Not Anxious* are of general interest. Muhlenberg and Concordia are cooperating on a monumental English edition of Luther. While Lutheran publishing is divided among the presses of the various synodical bodies, all cooperate in producing a unified catalog.

Westminster has pioneered in the publication of sound theological literature (Layman's Theological Library) and Biblical commentary (*Daily Study Bible*, ed. William Barclay) for laymen. Westminster's authors are drawn from various denominations, and its materials for youth particularly are used widely by other Protestant churches. The *Library of Christian Classics* now consisting of eighteen volumes represents the new Protestant concern with historical theology. Abingdon is the largest and oldest Protestant publisher. Its *Interpreter's Bible* embodies outstanding Protestant scholarship.

Recent Catholic publishing, in the words of T. B. Kenedy, seeks "to develop a broad, new Catholic literature which is fully imbued with the ancient, unchangeable truths of religion, but which reflects the . . . American scene. . . ." <sup>3</sup> The merging of Catholic immigrant groups with the older American Catholic community has created a cultural self-consciousness which is responsible for a phenomenal activity in publishing. Other manifestations are the increase of Catholic bookstores, a new emphasis on book reviewing in Catholic periodicals, the encouragement of reading in parochial schools, and the idea of an "apostolate of literature" as a part of Catholic Action. <sup>4</sup> The parish library movement, developed largely by the Thomas More Association, has done much to bring works of merit to the attention of the laity, and offers book selection assistance to parishes. Their periodical, *The Critic*, gives excellent coverage of the entire Catholic field. The association also cooperates with Henry Regnery Company in search of new Catholic authors.

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The success of the works of Thomas Merton can be singled out as a landmark in Catholic publishing. In its wake followed a growing list of titles on the contemplative life and monasticism, a significant deepening of Catholic piety. Other trends influencing publication are the liturgical movement which seeks to incorporate the individual more closely in worship,<sup>5</sup> a new sociology of parish life,<sup>6</sup> recent canonizations and proclamations on Mary, and a new concern with the social implications of Catholicism.<sup>7</sup>

Catholic scholars are reaching wider audiences. The philosophy of Maritain, the history of Christopher Dawson and the theology of De Lubac among others is being read by Protestants.<sup>8-10</sup> Monumental sets of the Fathers in translation are being published by Newman Press and Fathers of the Church, Inc. Study of the church in America has developed rapidly as demonstrated by the works of J. T. Ellis and W. J. Ong.<sup>11, 12</sup>

While a growing number of Catholic books are being published by general firms, most are published by Catholic houses. In 1957, Catholic firms issued 423 titles while general firms issued 255. Of the total, 23 per cent were translations. The major firms are Newman which specializes in theological scholarship, Sheed & Ward which produces literature of a high quality for laymen, Bruce Publishing Company, P. J. Kenedy, Benziger Brothers, and B. Herder Book Company which publish primarily books for the clergy. St. Anthony Guild Press which releases the Confraternity edition of the Bible, Fides Publishers which specializes in Catholic Action, and the presses of the Catholic University of America and Notre Dame University. In 1957, these firms produced a total of 223 titles compared to 139 for 1946.

Although only one book of Jewish authorship, J. L. Liebman's *Peace of Mind* has attained best-sellerhood, the growth of Jewish publication has been profound. In his recent history of American Judaism, Nathan Glazer sees the period since 1940 as a religious renaissance.<sup>13</sup> The cause is not Zionism, but the coming of age of Jewish religious institutions in America. While Zionism has inspired much literary production, its influence has been cultural rather than religious.

Prior to the 1940's Jewish publishing was largely limited to the Bloch Publishing Company and the Jewish Publication Society of America, and was conditioned by cultural rather than theological concerns. Since the war, however, there has been a trend toward theology. Glazer notes that "there is much greater interest in religion among Jews today than there has ever been before. Commercial pub-

lishers find it worth their while to publish books on Jewish theology, and the fact that there are today such books written by Americans . . . is revealing.”<sup>14</sup>

These titles, all by general publishers, include Will Herberg's *Judaism and Modern Man* (Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951) which interprets the role of the Jew in the modern religious scene, Milton Steinberg's *Basic Judaism* (Harcourt, Brace, 1951) and Abba Silver's *Where Judaism Differed* (Macmillan, 1956) present Judaism as a faith not restricted by traditional culture. The theological revival is best represented in the works of Martin Buber and Abraham Heschel.<sup>15, 16</sup>

Authors of popular titles which are “religious” rather than theological will tend to seek a general publisher because of larger royalties and wider distribution. The success of Norman Vincent Peale has influenced Prentice-Hall to publish “inspirational” books hovering on the borderline of religion and popular psychology. Such titles as Peale's *Unlock Your Faith-Power* differ markedly both in audience and theological content from *The Hard Commands of Jesus* by Roy Pearson and *By Means of Death* by Hughell Fosbroke, popular titles of two denominational publishers.

To counteract the insignificant theological character of some books, religious publishers have sought authors who will communicate theological truths in lay language. *The Church's Teaching*, series of Seabury Press, is an attempt to present positive doctrinal and historical content in such form for the adult communicant. Westminster's Layman's Theological Library is another successful venture. An increasing number of titles such as Edward P. Blair's *The Bible and You* (Abingdon) are written for study groups as well as individuals.

Another recent trend is the production of books which describe objectively various denominations. *The Episcopal Way of Life* by W. N. Pittenger (Prentice-Hall) is representative of this approach which promises to increase mutual understanding.

The success of best-selling Catholic titles has inspired Doubleday to publish a series of popular paperbacks, both reprints and original titles. The rapid increase of Catholic bookstores and parish libraries will without doubt extend the market for the popular religious book.

The renaissance in theological study is responsible for unparalleled activity in scholarship. *Ancient Christian Writers* (Newman), the *Library of Christian Classics* (Westminster), and the *Interpreters' Bible* are of monumental conception. New editions of the Reformers are in



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process, and Continental work like the *Corpus Christianorum*, the first comprehensive edition of the Church Fathers since Migne (1844-80) will have profound effect on American scholarship.

The demands of universities and seminaries have been met by reprinting many standard works. Harper's Torchbook series of classics of Protestant thought and Eerdmans' reprinting have been invaluable to theological education.

The work of the Religious Publishers' Group of the American Book Publishers' Council was supplemented in 1951 by the Protestant Church-Owned Publishers' Association which has increased business efficiency among denominational firms. Its future program includes clearinghouse facilities for cooperative publishing projects. The National Association of Catholic Publishers and Dealers ties publishing and retailing interests closely together. The expansion of Catholic bookstores makes this cooperation particularly significant.

No development in the history of Bible publications since the seventeenth century compares with the production of revised and modern-speech versions. The Revised Standard Version of the Protestant Bible and the Confraternity (Catholic) edition have given a new impetus to reading by the laity. These translations embody the fruit of modern scholarship. The Revised Standard Version was completed in 1952 by Thomas Nelson & Sons. The Confraternity edition, begun in 1941 and still in process, is published by St. Anthony Guild Press.

In addition to Oxford and Cambridge, the oldest publishers of Bibles for English-speaking Protestants, Nelson, World Publishing Company, William Collins Sons & Company, and A. J. Holman Company are leaders in the Protestant field. Catholic Bibles are published by St. Anthony and Kenedy among others, while the Jewish Publication Society furnishes the Jewish scriptures. The practice of printing prose in paragraph and poetry in verse form introduced by modern speech translations has spread to the King James version, and new and lighter type faces have produced interesting results.

The liturgical movement in Catholicism has made the Missal more widely used, but in general few changes have occurred in prayer-book publishing.

The role of the religious book has been described by Lester Asheim in a manner reminiscent of the prewar period: "The average patron will want simply written, emotionally satisfying works of general appeal, works that will console, convince and support him in his estab-

lished beliefs. The most used items in the religious collection will be much like the most used items of general fiction."<sup>17</sup> However, the situation has changed since 1946. The palliative character of popular religious literature is offset by more significant writings of solid theological content designed for a more informed laity rapidly increasing in numbers. Religious books are not written in a vacuum, as indicated by an increasing number of titles dealing with the relationship between religion and other concerns. Parish libraries have developed, partially as a result of the failure of the public library to meet needs in this area. In some localities there is a growing cooperation between library and parish. Suburbanization has separated the reader from the downtown religious bookstore. The re-evaluation of the role of religion in higher education forces college libraries to reappraise book-selection policies, and the public library is finding a new clientele for its religious section. While it could be said in 1935 that "theology commands little interest today,"<sup>18</sup> the religious climate had undergone a considerable change. Today, religion and books dealing with its many aspects hold the interest of a growing part of our population.

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